'I say to you that I am dead!': Medical Experiment and the Limits of Personhood in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845)

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Bricked up in walls, hidden under floorboards, or left in unmarked graves, Edgar Allan Poe's dead and dying bodies suffer continual violation and exploitation. Poe's fascination with inappropriate burial and exhumation reflects pressing antebellum fears of bodysnatching — a trade in dead bodies to supply medical schools, which targeted the corpses of the nation's noncitizens: African Americans, Native Americans, the institutionalised, and the itinerant. In this article I contend that Poe's tales of human mesmeric experiment, framed in the context of medical grave-robbing and exploitation, examine marginal states of being that are constructed as 'beneath' the status of full citizenship. Routinely subjecting his white protagonists to near-death or fatal experiences, Poe asks what it means for citizens to lose their self-possession and instead become the property of others.

I focus on 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845), a horrifying scientific tale about the terminally ill Valdemar, whose dying and then dead body is subject to the mesmeric control of an unnamed researcher, the narrator. A dying man suspended in a mesmeric state for several months, Valdemar impossibly proclaims his own death and speaks of his continued suffering after doctors declare him dead. The terrifying prospect of dissection and display usually experienced by the nation's non-citizens here afflicts an educated white male citizen. Subjected to mesmeric experiment, this body serves as a stark reminder that white men could lose their self-ownership. The experiment discovers the limits of personhood — that is, the negation of selfhood, where one experiences absolute loss of power and self-determinacy. In 'Valdemar', Poe therefore employs medical experiment to offer a pessimistic view of a precarious white male citizenship, one in which an idealised autonomous self is not assured and can be negated by the will of another.

As a text centred on an inexplicable voice, 'Valdemar' is often discussed in regards to Poe's approach to authorship and writing. Indeed, more generally, Poe's mesmerism tales ('A Tale of the Ragged Mountains' (1844), 'Mesmeric Revelations' (1844) and 'Valdemar') show him exploring how writing operates in the context of new scientific developments. For example, Adam Frank reads animal magnetism as an analogy for the telegraph and contends

that 'mesmerism offered Poe a way to theorize what a medium for writing could be or do' during the emergence of electrical communication.[1] Furthermore, structuralist and post-structuralist critics employ Valdemar's inexplicable voice to exemplify their arguments regarding language, life, and the self.[2] Much less attention has been given to the exploitative relationship between the narrator P— and Valdemar, or to reading Valdemar himself as a figure of loss, exclusion, and suffering. As a body used for medical education, Valdemar shares the same fate as the bodies of those from non-white and marginal groups that medical schools usually acquired for dissection and experiment. Employing antebellum medical science as a frame enables us to read Poe's anxieties concerning fragile citizenship, via situations where white male characters lose their abilities, faculties, and vitality, and therefore their social rights and privilege.[3] Valdemar's proximity to death and states of powerlessness render him, I argue, less than white and less than a person.

Personhood — the experience of individual autonomy and self-determination — depends on the conscious ability to recognise a 'sense of self' that can make choices and determine actions.[4] In the antebellum period, this ideal existed as a gendered, ableist, and racialised concept. The able, white, male body alone in the mid-nineteenth century marked the legal boundary of personhood.[5] In particular, whiteness denoted an inalienable property-in-oneself — the ability to control and govern one's body and labour. Whiteness meant not being a piece of property, but nevertheless became a property in itself that white Americans could use to assert their social dominance over non-white groups and to enjoy exclusive

[1] In addition, in thinking specifically about Poe's philosophy of the 'single effect', Bruce Mills argues that the short-story form 'would not have emerged without the psychological (and mesmeric) truths that legitimized the form's brevity, its concentration of narrative choices, and its peculiar repetition of sensation'. See Adam Frank, 'Valdemar's Tongue, Poe's Telegraphy', *English Literary History*, 72 (2005), 635-62 (p. 636); and Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), p. 66.

[2] Notably, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida disagreed on Valdemar's proclamation 'I am dead!' In 'Analyse texteulle d'un cone d'Edgar Poe' (1967), Barthes read the 'impossible utterance' as a 'blind spot of language structure', whereas Derrida argued that 'I am dead' made grammatical sense, even if it is not physically possible. Valdemar's ability to use language to assert 'I am dead' therefore marks his status as living. See Roland Barthes, 'Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Poe', trans. by Donald G. Marshall, *Poe Studies*, 10 (1977), 1-12 (p. 10); and Jacques Derrida, 'Discussion: Barthes — Todorov', in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and The Sciences of Man*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 145-56 (p. 156).

[3] Peter Coviello notes that Poe's characters who are close to death 'become slave-like, alarmingly *less* white' because they lose control of their own bodies and faculties. See Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 72.

[4] Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers: Volume 1 — Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 85.

[5] Here I draw on the work of legal historian Barbara Young Welke, who ties citizenship to 'able white men alone' as 'fully embodied legal persons'. Those outside of this category existed on the 'borders of belonging' in early-national and antebellum society. See Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 2.

social privileges.[6] Only members of this group were afforded the rights of citizenship — physical, legal, and economic freedoms — that allowed them to actualise the concept of personhood fully. Explicitly and inextricably linking citizenship and whiteness in 1836, James K. Paulding wrote in *Slavery in the United States*, 'the government of the United States, its institutions and its privileges, belong by right wholly and exclusively to white men; for they were purchased, not by the blood of the negroes, but by that of our fathers'.[7] Paulding's use of financial language clearly indicates a framing of citizenship in terms of property: to be able to acquire property, one must have property-in-oneself. Paulding's 'fathers' demonstrate their self-ownership by claiming independence apart from Britain, and due to their position as free men, can transfer these rights to their descendants.

Those outside this group of able white men experienced legal and social limits on their personhood, from white women, who had restricted freedom and suffrage, to African-American slaves, who experienced a 'social death' in being viewed as pieces of human property incapable of owning themselves or of actualising personhood.[8] The slave represented the complete absence of autonomy and self-ownership. Writing in 1839, Alexis de Tocqueville stated, 'the Negro has lost all property in his own person', in opposition to the able white man who could control his labour and, by extension, acquire and transfer capital.[9] For Colin Dayan, this 'negative' or erased personhood experienced by slaves occurs when 'living, willful, sentient, believing persons' are treated as and transformed into 'inanimate, rightless objects'.[10] She extends this condition of social or civic death to the prisoner, confined and dehumanised by their jailer, and the cadaver, discarded or exploited by the living. In her earlier work on Poe, Dayan asks that critics attend to Poe's characters who inhabit the 'margins of civilisation', where rights and privileges are 'compromised or threatened' — in other words, scenarios in which white characters experience the limits of personhood, and become less than white.[11]

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[6] This framing of the self through the language of property enabled European Americans to take ownership of African Americans as human property, and to colonise land belonging to Native-American tribes. See Cheryl L. Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (1993), 1707-93 (pp. 1721, 1718).
[7] James K. Paulding, *Slavery in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), p. 42.
[8] I take the idea of 'social death' from Orlando Patterson's landmark study *Slavery and Social Death*, which conceives enslavement as a state of living or social death. Slaves are not dead, but they are 'natally alienated' from kinship structures and therefore cannot claim the rights afforded to free men and women, in particular the right to inherit. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[9] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by Henry Reeve, 3rd American edn, 2 vols (New York: George Adlard, 1839), I, p. 332.
[10] Colin Dayan [formerly Joan Dayan], *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. xii, 33.
[11] Joan Dayan, 'Poe, Persons, and Property', *American Literary History*, 11 (1999), 405-425 (pp. 408, 405-06).

Dayan's work enables us to move beyond the scholarly question of a 'racist or nonracist Poe', which Poe studies has often pursued, to more complex and nuanced issues of racial, civic, and legal identity in the antebellum period.[12] This racist/nonracist enquiry borders discussions of the past three decades that often take a binary reading of Poe's black characters and symbols against white figures. For Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, 'no early American writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe'. In situating 'images of impenetrable whiteness' against Africanist presences, she asserts, Poe's work demonstrates that white American writers depend on blackness simultaneously to threaten and strengthen white character, and to shape national literature.[13] An edited collection entitled *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (2001), indebted to Morrison, has furthered her work, discussing how Poe expressed anxieties surrounding white fragility and black violence through literary form and style.[14] In these readings, black figures—whether slaves, indigenous populations, or animals — represent the master-slave relationship and the fear of African-American revolt in Poe's tales.[15] As Teresa Goddu notes, however, the danger in taking too literally Morrison's call to pursue a 'singular hunt' for racial figures and non-white signifiers has 'constrained Poe studies', producing scholarship too reliant on Poe's use of symbolism, instead of recognising 'the nexus of multiple cultural discourses' that Poe's writing occupies.[16] Although critics pay considerable attention to non-white characters as figures of otherness, they attend less to Poe's white male characters as racial figures themselves, in particular in regards to the formation of the citizen and their personhood.

Recent Poe criticism has returned to Dayan's discussions of personhood. Animal-studies works read Poe's texts as limning the threshold of what it means to be a person, a

[12] Dayan, 'Poe, Persons, and Property', p. 412. For example, there has been much debate over whether Poe wrote a pro-slavery review of Paulding's *Slavery in the United States* while working as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in April 1836, and to what extent this influenced his portrayal of black characters. For a summary of this debate, see Terence Whalen, 'Average Racism: Poe, Slavery, and the Wages of Literary Nationalism', in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. by J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3-40.

[13] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 32, 33.

[14] For example, Betsy Erkkila's essay examines Poe's symbolic 'fetishization of whiteness and purity' in his poetry as a response to fears of black violence and miscegenation, while Leyland Person considers Poe's racial signifiers within the 'complex aesthetic surface of his fiction', such as the gothic genre and the first-person psychological narrative, that actively obfuscate race. See Betsy Erkkila, 'The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary', in *Romancing the Shadow*, pp. 41-74 (p. 52); and Leland S. Person, 'Poe's Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales', in *Romancing the Shadow*, pp. 205-24 (p. 206).

[15] These figures include the emancipated Jupiter in 'The Gold Bug' (1843), enslaved manservants called Pompey in 'A Predicament' (1838) and 'The Man that was Used Up' (1839), the Tsalal islanders in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), the orang-utan in 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), and the eponymous feline in 'The Black Cat' (1843).

[16] Teresa A. Goddu, 'Rethinking Race and Slavery in Poe Studies', *Poe Studies*, 33.1-2 (2000), 15-18 (p. 15).

concept delineated along racial lines.[17] Concurrently, scholarship on Poe's prisons and asylums reads them as spaces of exclusion and marginalisation, in which white characters transform into less-than-white noncitizens.[18] This article builds on these works on Poe's carceral imagination, to focus on medical exploitation as another context that Poe uses to discuss the limits of personhood. In the first part of the article, I read Valdemar as an exploited medical subject, by outlining the racial politics of antebellum bodysnatching, dissection, and medical experiment. Within this context, the mesmerised body serves the same function as the dissected cadaver — Valdemar becomes a powerless less-than-white figure controlled by a professional white male. Using mesmerism as an analogue, the tale realises the frightening possibility that anyone, including educated white men, can lose possession of their body to those in pursuit of medical or scientific knowledge. In a society where the voice marks an autonomous self who can speak for himself and participate in a civil group, unusual or unexpected voices — ventriloquism, cries, shrieks, howls, interruptions, shouts — act out in resistance.[19] Valdemar's inexplicable voice articulates what Russ Castronovo terms 'discorporation' — the exclusion from a community and the loss of the rights and privileges of the citizen.[20] Speaking of his entrapment and suffering, Valdemar undermines the expectation of an autonomous and self-possessed antebellum citizenship, while simultaneously protesting the exploitation he experiences as a dying-then-dead medical subject.

In the second part of the article, I discuss how Valdemar significantly challenges the narrator's mesmeric control. Valdemar's voice from beyond the grave disrupts the professional white male community around him. The narrator's success is predicated not only on controlling Valdemar's body but also on comprehending it. The narrator's confounded responses to the misbehaving body mark a failure of rational manhood to assert its civic

[17] Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Animalia Americana* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Dominic Mastroianni, 'Hospitality and the Thresholds of the Human in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 40 (2013), 185-202; and Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[18] Erin Forbes tracks depictions of social death, namely incarceration and slavery, in Poe's tale of living death, 'The Premature Burial' (1844). Aaron Matthew Percich reads asylum tale 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether' (1845) as a commentary on antebellum prejudice against less-than-white Irish immigrants. See Erin E. Forbes, 'From Prison Cell to Slave Ship: Social Death in "The Premature Burial"', *Poe Studies*, 46 (2013), 32-58; and Aaron Matthew Percich, 'Irish Mouths and English Tea-Pots: Orality and Unreason in "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether"', *Poe Studies*, 47 (2014), 76-99.

[19] Nancy Ruttenburg identifies these 'unanticipated, inarticulate, [and] uncontainable' voices emerging in antebellum literature as resistant to a written and spoken discourse privileging white men. See Nancy Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 6.

[20] Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 3.

identity, bolstered by the observation and classification central to medical and scientific phenomena.

Antebellum Medicine and the Racial Politics of Grave-Robbing

From the late eighteenth century, a drive towards professionalisation in American medicine increased the desire for and procurement of cadavers. Simultaneously, by the antebellum period, the doctor had become a figurehead of middle-class masculinity, who observed, manipulated, and managed the bodies of others. As a result of Jacksonian public distrust of educated professionals and elitist qualifications, middle-class doctors feared that medicine could become a classless field, diluted by untrained physicians, quackery, and alternative treatments such as homeopathy.[21] In order to distinguish medicine, particularly surgery, as a science rather than a trade, the body, living or dead, became a site of knowledge, which could be studied in detail. 'The exemplary methodology of medical science', dissection programmes encouraged professionalism by offering medical students tactile knowledge of human anatomy and providing surgeons with bodies for practice.[22] Students and staff expected schools to provide cadavers for dissection and often criticised shortages in the pages of medical journals. For example, in an 1840 essay, Dr Andrew Boardman of Geneva College, Pennsylvania complained, '[n]ot *a single subject* was provided for dissection during the *whole session*' of an anatomy course, although students had paid $40 each to secure bodies.[23] In an inaugural lecture to Pennsylvania College medical students, author and doctor Robert Montgomery Bird bemoaned the fact that public distaste for dissection and a lack of legislation meant that the anatomist was 'in almost constant fear of the *penitentiary*' for relying on illegal grave-robbing to satisfy demand.[24]

To avoid prosecution, grave-robbers and medical students (who were sometimes the same people) targeted the poor, the homeless, the institutionalised, itinerant workers, sailors, African Americans, Native Americans, and recent immigrants. Ironically, disposable bodies

[21] Richard Hofstadter summarised Jacksonian anti-intellectualism as a 'distrust of expertise', a 'desire to uproot the entrenched classes', and a doctrine asserting that 'important functions were simple enough to be performed by anyone'. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962), pp. 155-56.

[22] Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 53.

[23] Andrew Boardman, 'An Essay on the Means of Improving Medical Education and Elevating Medical Character', in *Medical America in the Nineteenth Century: Readings from the Literature*, ed. by Gert H. Brieger (London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), pp. 24-36 (p. 26), emphasis in original.

[24] Robert Montgomery Bird, *The Difficulties of Medical Science: An Inaugural Lecture, Introductory to a Course of Lectures* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Medical College, 1841), p. 17, emphasis in original. There were a number of public riots against medical dissection in New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Vermont. See Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, p. 107.

that seemed to be accorded very little or no importance or respect when alive became incredibly valuable for the medical profession and those who supplied the trade. States trafficked socially dead cadavers to provide for medical schools across the nation, in particular transporting bodies from northern cities into the South.[25] The practice was public enough in some cities that Harriet Martineau observed in 1838, '[i]n Baltimore the bodies of coloured people exclusively are taken for dissection "because the whites do not like it, and the coloured people cannot resist"'.[26] This illicit trade in bodies was well known in Baltimore, with reports of disturbed graves and stolen body parts appearing in city newspapers. A Baltimore resident, Poe channels stories of resourceful dentists into 'Berenice' (1835), in which the obsessive narrator disturbs Berenice's premature grave to extract all her teeth.

Although this practice targeted African Americans, a body of literature in the mid-century expresses *white* anxiety regarding loss of personhood through medical bodysnatching. For example, in Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836), the eponymous protagonist uses cadavers for social mobility or survival, transferring his spirit into recently deceased bodies, including that of Virginia slave, Tom. Executed after a failed revolt, Tom's body is exhumed and examined by a group of students 'desirous to show their skill in anatomy' in front of a dozen 'respectable gentlemen'. Sheppard is able to escape into another body before the dissection, but at the novel's conclusion, he finds that his original unattended body has been stolen and embalmed by German doctor Feuerteufel 'for the especial benefit of science and the world'. When confronted with his own exploited corpse, Sheppard is horrified that his *white* body could be treated with such little dignity. His stolen cadaver signals the terrifying possibility that he could have more value in death — as Feuerteufel's educational and entertaining property — than in life. His 'sorrow and affliction' compel him to re-enter his body, reclaim his family estate, and reassert his property-in-himself.[27] Similarly, in George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845) and J. H. Robinson's *Marietta* (1846), doctors and students are themselves depicted as reliant on stealing poor and vulnerable bodies of any race.[28]

[25] For more on dissection of African Americans in the South, see *Bones in the Basement: Postmortem Racism in Nineteenth-Century Medical Training*, ed. by Robert Blakely and Judith M. Harrington (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998).
[26] Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 3 vols (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), I, p. 231.
[27] Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*, ed. by Christopher Looby (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), pp. 371, 372, 406.
[28] In *The Quaker City*, Devil-Bug stalks Philadelphia to procure fresh cadavers for the mysterious doctor Ravoni, describing with glee the 'jolly business' of 'mash[ing] the coffin lid into small pieces with a blow o' the

Broadly, these snatched bodies were unclaimed by friends or family, left unsecure in municipal spaces, or housed by the state, and so considered acceptable for dissection.[29] For white citizens, as these stories imply, the dissection table carried great stigma because it meant they had died without friends or finances to protect their body after death. In Poe's early farce 'Loss of Breath' (1835), an opportunistic publican takes advantage of the abandoned and seemingly dead narrator, by selling his 'corpse' to a local surgeon. Similarly, the narrator in 'The Premature Burial' describes the horror of being buried 'as a dog — nailed up in some common coffin […] some ordinary and nameless *grave*', because he has lost his friends' protection.[30] Furthermore, the intra- and inter-state circulation of medical corpses bore frightening resemblances to the slave trade, compounded by the fact that a large number of cadavers were African Americans who 'cannot resist'. To be dissected after death was to be treated in the same way as the noncitizen; it negated the rights and privileges that the white citizen had assumed during life. In a context of debates over human dissection in the 1830s and 1840s, Poe's medical experiments reveal alternative anxieties that a *white* male citizen could be exploited, lose possession of his body, and become subject to volition by another professional white male. Under the doctor or researcher's gaze, white male citizens in Poe's medical tales are reduced to parts; their bodies are the means to the end of medical discovery.

In 'Valdemar', a white, educated male degenerates into another marginalised body used for medical research. Valdemar inhabits a liminal position — he is subjected to painful mesmeric experiment, yet as an editor and writer he is part of the professional male community who have staked their civic identity on scholarly pursuits. At the beginning of the tale, Valdemar consents to the experiment, declaring 'feebly, yet quite audibly, "Yes, I wish to be mesmerized"'.[31] When discussed with P— his interest in the experiment is 'vividly excited'; although previously dismissive of earlier experiments, at this point he shares with

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spade' and 'drag[ging] the stiff corpse out from its restin' place'. In *Marietta*, doctors and grave-robbers discuss the best bodies to procure for experiment. Medical student Levator cannot bring himself to dissect a beautiful female cadaver and pays the body-snatchers to return her to the grave. See George Lippard, *The Quaker City, Or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 368; and J. H. Robinson, *Marietta, or the Two Students: A Tale of the Dissecting Room and 'Body Snatchers'* (Boston: Jordan & Wiley, 1846).

[29] In the 1830s and 1840s, legislation passed in some states bolstered educational access by allowing dissecting programmes access to prisons, poorhouses, and asylums, reinforcing the link between social death and post-mortem exploitation. For example in Michigan, physicians could acquire the bodies of all criminals who died in prison or were executed. See Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, p. 123.

[30] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Premature Burial', in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols (New York: Random House, 1978), III, pp. 953-72 (pp. 967-68).

[31] Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, III, pp. 1228-44 (p. 1236). Hereafter references to this edition will follow in parenthesis.

the narrator a pursuit of scientific knowledge (p. 1234). As a means of establishing autonomy and power, middle-class masculinity tied itself to discourses of 'rational objectivity' and the 'scientific, civic management' of the natural world and the human body.[32] For example, the early anthropologist Samuel George Morton amassed a vast collection of human skulls from around the globe in the 1830s, often without consent, in order to construct a hierarchy of the natural world in which the Caucasian race were ascendant. Using craniometry, cranioscopy, and craniography (measuring, observing, and describing skulls), he sought to classify and categorise the world's populations systematically.[33] In Poe's tale, Valdemar is another 'case' in the unnamed narrator's continuing interest in mesmerism, a burgeoning pseudo-science, and it is established early on that this case report is born of a desire to dispel 'a garbled or exaggerated account' and 'unpleasant misrepresentations' already in press of what occurred (pp. 1233, 1234).

Although it is unclear what, if any, scientific or medical qualifications the narrator holds, from this opening he establishes himself as a member of the professional, rational, white middle class, who use scientific observation to bolster their claim on civic authority. When the narrator claims that 'there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission: — no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis*', he aspires to fill empirically this gap in contemporary studies on mesmerism (p. 1233). Mesmerism, or animal magnetism, originated in the work of German doctor Franz Mesmer (1734-1815). He theorised that magnetic fluid in the body could be controlled to heal illness and mental agitation, such as hysteria. French mesmerist Charles Poyen introduced the practice to the United States in the mid-1830s, delivering lectures and writing pieces for the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*.[34] By the time Poe's tale was written, mesmerism was increasingly used in America to treat illness and induce altered states of consciousness, including clairvoyance. For example, in the mid-1840s, mesmerist Phineas Quimby rose to prominence for his partnership with teenager Lucius Burkmar, who could read minds, and diagnose and treat illnesses, when hypnotised.[35]

[32] Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 103.
[33] Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 17.
[34] Eric T. Carlson, 'Charles Poyen Brings Mesmerism to America', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 15 (1960), 121-32.
[35] James C. Whorton, *Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Having read Charles Hare Townshend's comprehensive *Facts in Mesmerism* (1844) and Rev. Gibson Smith's *Lectures on Clairmativeness, or Human Magnetism* (1845), and attending lectures by prominent mesmerist Andrew Jackson Davis, Poe was well aware of mesmerism as scientific enquiry and medical practice.[36] In 'Mesmeric Revelation', the narrator employs mesmerism to induce altered states of mind and discover the limits of consciousness. His subject, the dying Vankirk, produces long clairvoyant statements on the nature of God and the soul when hypnotised. Similarly, in 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains', the ailing Bedloe recalls a past life, which he experiences when mesmerised. Like Quimby and Burkmar, the tale's physician Dr Templeton uses the practice as medical treatment in order to alleviate Bedloe's neuralgia. By contrast, in 'Valdemar', the narrator engages in pure experiment, professing no hope of curing the ailing man. For the narrator's '*in articulo mortis*' experiment to have a suitable subject, it is necessary that Valdemar is terminally ill and cannot be saved; from the outset he views Valdemar as a dead body. Although P— is not a physician himself, he has the full co-operation of Valdemar's doctors; he claims that D— and F— 'opposed no objection' to his experiment. On the contrary, they encourage his mesmerism. Their curiosity is 'greatly excited' and, by the latter stages of the experiment, they are in collaboration with the narrator, deciding how to continue (p. 1238). This is not a mere invention of Poe's; although physicians were wary that unqualified men such as Davis, Quimby, and Burkmar would dilute the class status of professional medicine, they themselves were increasingly interested in experiments that utilised the body's magnetism. For example, physician Henry Hall Sherwood routinely dismissed as quackery Davis's medical claims regarding animal magnetism, but nonetheless developed his own treatments applying 'rotary magnetic' machines to the body.[37] The doctors in 'Valdemar', knowing that Valdemar is hours from death, and that they are absolved of the physician's healing responsibility, similarly turn their attention to satisfying professional curiosities about the bodily effects of mesmerism.

The narrator's mesmeric experiment mirrors the power relationship between the doctor and patient. This hierarchical relationship depended on the submission of the mesmeric body to the magnetiser's influence, just as a patient submits to the physician's instructions or manipulations, or as a dissector completely controls a cadaver. In Poe's mesmerism tales, the patient or subject is under complete control of the doctor or researcher.

[36] Steve Carter, 'A Possible Source for "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"', *Poe Studies*, 12 (1979), 36.
[37] Henry Hall Sherwood, *The New-York Dissector*, 4 (1847), p. 247, quoted in Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, p. 156.

In 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains', Bedloe's will 'succumbed rapidly to that of the physician […] sleep was brought about almost instantaneously by the mere volition of the operator'.[38] Valdemar's body, initially resistant to the narrator's passes, becomes more receptive the closer he is to death, and P— recalls that 'his arm very readily, although feebly, followed every direction I assigned it with mine' (p. 1238). Valdemar thereby loses possession of his own body and is subsumed into the narrator's research agenda; the mesmerised body loses its autonomy and becomes just as pliable as the cadaver.

What is more, Valdemar is so thoroughly diseased that he blurs the boundary between a body and a corpse: we could be reading an autopsy. When the narrator sees his friend at the beginning of the tale, the night before his experiment, he describes the dying Valdemar in dense medical detail. The text becomes an imitation of a pathologist cutting through the body, as the gaze pierces the skin and we see that parts of Valdemar's lungs are in a 'semi-osseous or cartilaginous state' and 'entirely useless for all purposes of vitality', and there are places in which 'permanent adhesion [of the lung] to the ribs had taken place'. The deterioration of his body takes place with 'very unusual rapidity […] the adhesion had only been observed during the three previous days'. He is decaying in front of the doctors' eyes: his cheekbones break through his skin and his pulse is 'barely perceptible' (p. 1235). Valdemar is subject not only to a medical experiment, but also to a kind of living dissection. He is so corpse-like that his body functions the same way as a cadaver in medical science: it is there purely to educate. This narrative of living dissection acts as pedagogical tool by providing both a map of compartmentalised human organs, and, in the case of ill bodies, drawing the eye to where disease has ruptured these boundaries — the blurring of tissue and bone through the lung adhesions and emaciated face. The observer must overcome the challenge of this increasingly incoherent bodily mass to understand the pathology of the disease. The emotion that P— may feel in seeing his dying friend is completely absent, replaced by objective medical surveillance, what Michel Foucault calls the 'medical gaze'.[39] Medical student Mr L—l's presence evinces the pedagogical nature of the experiment. His role is not only as a 'reliable witness', but also as a note taker, aiding his own education as well as providing the narrator with memoranda (p. 1236). These professional medical men exemplify a 'disembodied and disinterested observing subject, surveying, evaluating and categorizing local others'.[40] The

[38] Poe, 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains', in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, III, pp. 935-53 (p. 941).
[39] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973), p. 8.
[40] Nelson, *National Manhood*, p. 124.

body of medical experiment, living or dead, is a source of knowledge that only men of science can read and comprehend.

Again, as the narrator and medical professionals continually survey Valdemar, Poe replicates this process through dense descriptive passages dwelling on the mesmerism's effect. Towards the end of the tale, P— states, '[f]rom this period until the close of last week — *an interval of nearly seven months* — we continued to make daily calls at M. Valdemar's house, accompanied, now and then, by medical and other friends' (p. 1241, emphasis in original). His peculiar state renders Valdemar a medical specimen and entertaining curiosity. The semi-public display of Valdemar's almost-dead body in front of an educated white audience has clear parallels with both public autopsies and the burgeoning 'freak show' in the antebellum period. The case of Joice Heth illuminates how the cadaver could function as a continually looked-upon site of both knowledge and entertainment during this period. In 1835, P. T. Barnum purchased Heth, an elderly black woman, and claimed she was George Washington's 161-year-old 'mammy'. Blind and paralysed, she existed as a living corpse that Barnum displayed at venues across New England as a supposed relic of colonial America. Newspaper reports described her emaciated body as 'a mere skeleton covered with skin […] her whole appearance very much resembles a mummy of the days of the Pharoahs [*sic*], taken entire from the catacombs of Egypt'.[41] A source of 'sensation among the lovers of the curious and the marvellous', she was also examined by 'the most learned and scientific men in this country' who sought to verify and explain her age. Upon her death in 1836, she was publicly autopsied in Manhattan's City Saloon to 1500 paying spectators, in an effort to determine how she had lived so long. The autopsy proved Barnum a liar — Heth 'could not have been more than *seventy-five*, or, at the utmost, *eighty years of age!*' — and the newspapers felt it in the public interest to reprint the detailed intimate descriptions of her corpse being opened up and inspected.[42]

Heth's body was paraded around while she lived, displayed publicly upon her death, and further publicised through the print media. Her exhibition and subsequent autopsy sit at the interstice between popular culture and medical education. Heth's corpse became a

[41] *New York Baptist*, 16 September 1835, quoted in Benjamin Reiss, *Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 2.
[42] *The Life of Joice Heth, the Nurse of Gen. George Washington, (the Father of Our Country,) Now Living at the Astonishing Age of 161 Years, and Weighs Only 46 Pounds* (New York, 1835), pp. 10, 8 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/heth/heth.html> [accessed 24 February 2017]; and 'Dissection of Joice Heth — Precious Humbug Exposed', *New York Sun*, 26 February 1836, p. 13, emphasis in original, in *The Lost Museum Archive*, City University of New York <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/dissection-of-joice-heth-precious-humbug> [accessed 24 February 2017].

resource that allowed professional men to stake their claim within medical science; in the City Saloon and across the pages of New York newspapers, each scientist and editor 'pick[ed] apart the body to enhance his cultural prestige'.[43] Their respected public voices (both spoken and written) depended on Heth's continued silence; they inscribed their racialised medical theories onto her dying-then-dead body. For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Heth is the first American freak, 'the direct antithesis of the able-bodied, white male figure upon which the developing notion to the American normate was predicated'.[44] The white middle-class 'normate' male, such as the doctor, displaced his fears of post-mortem loss of personhood onto African-American and other marginal cadavers, bodies to which that state already denied selfhood while alive. In the case of Valdemar, these anxieties are not deflected onto the black body, but reflect back onto the dying body of white male citizen.

It is worth paying attention to how Valdemar's whiteness is delineated in the tale, which supports reading him as a liminal white person. Valdemar is a recent Polish immigrant, but is part of an intellectual community. He is referred to as 'the well-known compiler of the "Bibliotheca Forensica", and author (under the *nom de plume* of Isaachar Marx) of the Polish versions of "Wallenstein" and "Gargantua"', texts originally written in German and French (p. 1234). From this description, the reader can infer that Valdemar is Polish and possibly Jewish. A recent immigrant, living in Harlem since 1839, bachelor Valdemar has 'no relatives in America who would be likely to interfere' with the experiment, or claim his corpse, a fact that the narrator celebrates (p. 1234). Valdemar's dying, and later dead, body is the narrator's to do with as he pleases. Yet, although his ethnic identity places him on the peripheries of whiteness, his authorship and translation work incorporates him into a professional male sphere inhabited by the narrator and his doctors. Through his scholarly pursuits, Valdemar 'becom[es] Caucasian', Matthew Frye Jacobson's term for the potential of Central Europeans to be seen as white in the mid-nineteenth century.[45] In contrast to African Americans like Heth, Valdemar's ethnicity denotes the capacity for autonomy and self-possession, making him white enough to be considered a potential citizen.[46] It is this property-in-oneself that is negated through the mesmeric control and exploitation of his body.

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[43] Reiss, p. 155.
[44] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 59.
[45] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 8.
[46] Living in the United States for at least five years, Valdemar would qualify to apply for legal naturalisation and citizenship. See *Native and Alien. The Naturalization Laws of the United States: Containing Also the Alien Laws of the State of New York* (Rochester, NY: D. M. Dewey, 1855), pp. 30-34.

When he is suspended and observed in this liminal state for several months, the white, educated Valdemar transforms into one of the many marginalised bodies laid open and experimented on in the antebellum period. In this regard, it is particularly noteworthy that, as he approaches death, Valdemar himself becomes blacker, an effect of his body's decay and disease. He takes on a 'leaden hue', his eyes are 'utterly lustreless', and the ossification turns his internal organs black and putrid (p. 1235). In his proximity to death *and* blackness, Valdemar is treated by the white, rational community purely as a medical specimen. The image of a group of educated white men surveying and manipulating a prone body is deeply uncomfortable. Anatomised and surveyed, Valdemar is dehumanised and reduced to a utility by and for a community of professional and rational white men. However, the tale is not a commentary on African-American medical slavery, and I avoid a symptomatic reading that would suggest that his darkened body acts as a stand-in for systematically scientifically exploited African Americans. Instead, to read Valdemar's decaying and observed body in this context of publicly known racial exploitation is to realise a terrifying possibility for the white male 'normate' citizen — the loss of personal will, self-possession, and autonomy. Unlike Heth, Valdemar has the capacity to agree to the experiment, but through his inexplicable voice, he withdraws this consent, and with increasingly aggravated speech, he challenges the narrator's control and comprehension of his body as a medical specimen.

An Inexplicable Voice and the Failure of White Rational Manhood

As the white body of the educated Valdemar grows darker in appearance and stranger in action, the narrator's reactions to him notably shift away from the scientific, rational discourse of the text's opening. Blackness permeates Valdemar's white body, rendering him repulsive. When the doctors and narrator see the black tongue, so visible against Valdemar's cadaverous white skin, they are horrified:

> The upper lip, at the same time, writhed itself away from the teeth, whist it had previously covered completely; whilst the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely extended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue […] so hideous beyond conception was the appearance of M. Valdemar at this moment, that there was a general shrinking back from the region of the bed. (p. 1239)

At this point in the text, Valdemar begins substantially to unnerve the rational community surrounding him, as his decaying body is so unusual (even for those accustomed to death) that it is beyond the narrator's cognitive capability to imagine even something that is so immediately present to his senses. The black tongue is so alarming because it is so visible, 'in

full view', whereas previously it has been concealed. The exposure of the uncanny tongue uncovers the universal truth of the body's vulnerability and decomposition after death. Like the living autopsy at the beginning of the text, in which Valdemar's individuality is stripped away to render him just another diseased body, the black tongue protruding during the experiment reveals the material self that is vulnerable to manipulation and surveillance by other citizens. At the same time, the tongue is the first sign of Valdemar's body acting independently from the narrator's control and defying his rational approach, in order to protest his liminal state.

When Valdemar apparently begins to speak, and the tongue itself produces hideous utterances, the narrator's alarm increases. Detailed passages describe the voice emanating not from Valdemar's vocal organs, but from his extended, vibrating black tongue and 'distended and motionless jaws':

> In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears — at least mine — from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch. (p. 1240)

The cavernous timbre of Valdemar's voice suggests a ventriloquial source that cannot be mapped onto the human body, and defies the medical community's rational logic. The synaesthesia that features in the above passage is the only way the narrator can communicate a sense of what he hears, but this does not provide an explanation of the voice's origin. Again, he struggles to find the cognitive ability to process the circumstances or the appropriate lexicon to convey events, later claiming that the sound is 'indescribable' (p. 1240). His medical gaze, which has previously penetrated Valdemar's diseased body, cannot successfully read or comprehend what is now in front of him. In this scene, discourses of rational observation, which bolster white male professional autonomy and authority, start to falter.

The narrator takes pains to explain that what he heard was not nonsensical ravings or death rattles but clear 'syllabification' (p. 1240). For P—, there is a clear dissociation between what he can see (a dead body with extended mouth and swollen tongue) and what he can hear (distinct words). After his tongue begins to vibrate, the voice inside Valdemar says, '[y]es; — no; — I *have been* sleeping — and now — now — I *am dead*'. Valdemar's *unheimlich* disembodied voice leads to the narrator's cognitive dissonance, one that manifests via the narrator's strong physical reaction. Confronted by the seemingly

impossibly talking corpse, who is simultaneously alive and dead, P— cannot comprehend what he encounters and so returns to his body; the scene provokes an uncontrollable physical response, his 'unutterable, shuddering horror' (p. 1240, emphasis in original). The detached medical gaze has been overwhelmed by this subjective visceral response that cannot be processed in the written form on which men of science staked their authority. P—'s horror cannot be articulated, whereas Valdemar, inexplicably, *does* articulate his own personal torment. Valdemar's unexpected and powerful voice breaks through the rational written form to communicate that a white man can no longer be a person, a terrifying realisation for the professional, educated community that the narrator represents.

Unlike Poe's earlier 'The Premature Burial', in which a man shouts, 'I am alive' to save himself from dissection, Valdemar proclaims the very opposite.[47] J. Gerald Kennedy claims that, in contrast to P—'s detached, rational narrative voice, Valdemar 'inton[es] words empty of human content'.[48] But I would counter that, although the production of the voice is beyond rational comprehension, Valdemar's speech clearly verbalises human consciousness and desires for self-possession. Valdemar, an established translator and editor, has lost his access to print and therefore his claim on professional and rational white masculinity; instead he must rely on the more primitive, yet universal, voice. This voice articulates Valdemar's position: trapped between life and death in a dysfunctional and diseased body; treated as an object, but with an active mind inside. It speaks of a desire to be free from its bondage; Valdemar orders the narrator to end his entrapment in the corpse-body, saying, '[y]es: — asleep now. Do not wake me! — let me die so!' (p. 1238). He wrestles against the limits of personhood that the medical experiment has set. Saying 'I am dead' is Valdemar's attempt at regaining self-determination and articulating his personhood by directing the experiment to its end. The tale portrays white male citizenship as a battle for autonomy from and dominance over other white men, not just non-male non-white figures. Valdemar attempts to recover his personhood by speaking against the narrator's manipulations, while the narrator seeks throughout to assert his power through an authoritative narrative, one that is dependent on his controlling and categorising Valdemar.

'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' is not Poe's only tale in which a highly unusual corpse defies a group of professional educated men. In 'Some Words with a Mummy' (1845), a group of Egyptologists reanimate with galvanic battery the mummy

[47] Poe, 'The Premature Burial', p. 961.
[48] J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 208.

Allamistakeo after thousands of years' entombment. The mummy begins to converse with an unexpected eloquence, shocking the scientists by indicating that a savage, non-white corpse could not only speak so well, but also profess that his culture, science, and society are greater than theirs, 'gleefully pok[ing] holes in elite white male privilege'.[49] The humour of Allamistakeo's teasing and the white professionals' umbrage is absent in 'Valdemar', replaced with horror. Whereas Allamistakeo's resistant voice is calm and clear, presenting a well-expressed criticism of the white scientific community, Valdemar's inexplicable speech becomes increasingly violent in its articulation. His inexplicable utterances grow in anger towards the end of 'Valdemar', and he shouts, '[f]or God's sake! — quick! — quick! — put me to sleep — or, quick! — waken me! — quick! — *I say to you that I am dead!*' (p. 1242, emphasis in original). The exclamatory voice once again urges the narrator, who controls Valdemar's physical body, to give him his freedom in death. Valdemar's wishes — to be asleep or awake while being dead — are impossible scenarios and both result in his continued death. For the white educated male, non-existence — a waking or sleeping death — is preferable to an existence manipulated by others. As the experiment reaches its climax, it is clear that his previous autonomous state cannot be recuperated.

Although the narrator attempts to write an authoritative account of events, as opposed to the earlier 'garbled' sensational pieces, he sets up the gruesome climax as something truly beyond comprehension, for which 'it is quite impossible that any human being could have been prepared'. The tale ends as follows:

> As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of 'dead! dead!' absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once — within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk — crumbled — absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome — of detestable putridity. (p. 1243, emphasis in original)

Here, the narrator continues to attempt descriptive observation, although events have long since departed from the expectations, raised by the beginning of the account, that this is a medical case study. As descriptive terms overlap ('shrunk — crumbled — absolutely — *rotted*'), the narrator, — editing the quick notes of Mr. L—I —, attempts to describe the state of Valdemar's corpse using an observational vocabulary. Once again the rational voice of medical discourse experiences a lexical failure. The narrator's attempts to describe him

[49] Marcia D. Nichols, 'Poe's "Some Words with a Mummy" and Blackface Anatomy', *Poe Studies*, 48 (2015), 2-16 (p. 2). See also Nelson, *National Manhood*, pp. 204-16.

using any kind of vocabulary, let alone an observational one, are insufficient. Valdemar's protestations are so extreme that they cause the body itself to rupture and disintegrate completely. The body's rapid and grotesque decomposition destroys any post-mortem knowledge that the narrator and medical professionals might have hoped to garner, and the experiment is plunged into total chaos as a 'nearly liquid mass' surrounds the onlookers. Whereas the diseased physique earlier served a pedagogical purpose in identifying Valdemar's illness, the liquid body, rotting beyond 'natural' rates of decomposition, prevents the medical gaze from observing, categorising, and diagnosing. The body of evidence, in which the rational community invested so much, has perished. There is nothing constructive remaining: in fact, there is only total destruction.

This gruesome ending gives voice to fears of discorporation by destroying the white male citizen. Valdemar is an abject, out-of-control body leaking into the world, causing the reader to be both drawn towards him and repelled by his rotted form. Woven into this gore, which is both entertaining and revolting — and entertaining *because* it is revolting — are legitimate fears of exploitation and manipulation, which Poe deliberately chooses not to assuage. The ending provokes an almost physical reaction from the reader, just like the narrator's recoiling in the tale. However, although this body horror can be seen as a distraction in that it provokes a visceral response, instead of a contemplative one, the text's final image of male bodily destruction maps onto anxieties over the erasure of personhood. Valdemar is first reduced to a body, and then reduced to nothing. His attempts to regain self-possession and end the narrator's control come at the expense of his own survival. An early forerunner to the 'disaffirmative' contemporary horror fiction that Linda Holland-Toll identifies, such as Stephen King's *The Mist* (1986), and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), 'Valdemar' ends without resolution and Poe refuses to reinstate its original societal norms of white male rationality and autonomy.[50] Once the voice erupts through the body, the body cannot be reconstructed and these horrifying exclamations cannot be unarticulated. In the tale's horrific climax, the anxieties about the loss of self-possession, which Valdemar represents, and failed professionalism, which P— represents, hang in the ether like Valdemar's final explosive utterances. After the gruesome ending has faded, the reader is therefore left with the anxiety that white manhood — ostensibly an autonomous and authoritative self, bolstered by rational pursuits — is vulnerable.

[50] Linda J. Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community and Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), p. 10.

In 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', Poe employs discourses surrounding contemporary medical exploitation to discorporate Valdemar and show the limits of white male personhood, lost when self-possession is negated at the hands of fellow white, educated men. Poe depicts consciousness — represented through an enduring voice — as somehow present within a clinically dead body. In doing so, he voices anxieties over white men being reduced purely to bodies and material resources — just like the nation's non-citizens who routinely filled America's dissecting rooms — as opposed to fully autonomous and self-possessed citizens. In 'Valdemar', limited personhood is violently protested and destructively uttered, voicing a pessimistic and disaffirmative view of white male citizenship in the antebellum period.